



## **Teachers' Perceptions, Beliefs and Practice of Code Switching in English Language Class**

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### **Abstract**

Code switching is a widely observed phenomenon especially seen in multilingual and multicultural communities. In ELT classrooms, code switching comes into use either in the teachers' or the students' discourse. Although it is not favored by many educators, one should have at least an understanding of the functions of switching between the native language and the foreign language and its underlying reasons. This understanding will provide language teachers with a heightened awareness of its use in classroom discourse and will obviously lead to better of instruction by either eliminating it or dominating its use during the foreign language instruction. The teachers are in favor of using target language only but in practice they are bound to use code switching practice for varying reasons. The students do have varying views about the teachers' code switching but due to their less proficiency in the target language which is English, the teachers follow the practice of code switching.

Key Words: Code Switching, Bilingual, ELT, Language, Perception,



## Introduction

The teaching and learning of second or foreign languages has, over decades, been plagued by debates, sometimes rather heated, about the advantages and disadvantages of different pedagogies including code-switching (or code-mixing) that whether it should be encouraged or discouraged? Sociolinguists use the term code to denote any identifiable speech variety; including both a particular language and a particular variety of a language. Code switching is an everyday reality in every place where more than one language is spoken in everyday communications. Many scholars have studied extensively about the patterns of code switching and the reasons for code switching. People who master more than one language are called bilingual or multilingual. Hundreds of millions people in the world routinely use two or more languages in their daily lives. This also happens among the Pakistani people who are multilingual; they master at least the national language that is Urdu, and their regional language. The English language class rooms are no exception to this phenomenon. The ability to code switch is an important tool for the individual in the learning process within the context of a multilingual and multicultural society. Code switching is considered as the most creative aspect of bilingual discourse but in teaching and learning a foreign language situation it is primarily seen as undesirable particularly and the opinions vary in the use of L1 in the classrooms of English language. Since code switching is used in various and different situations, this paper will focus on the class room context and, primarily, on the teacher's ways of and reasons for code mixing and the image of the teacher among the learner about their teachers. Code switching as a teaching strategy is usually a part of a class discussion but in Pakistani teaching situation it is regarded as a weakness in general and specifically at masters level and in English in particular. Teachers are supposed to use only the English language while teaching English literature and linguistics, and they wish to do so as well, but the actual practice goes the other way. The teachers' use of code switching is not always performed consciously; this means that the teacher is not always aware of the functions and outcomes of the code switching process. Therefore, in some cases it may be regarded as an automatic and unconscious behavior. Nevertheless, either



conscious or not, it necessarily covers some basic functions which may be beneficial in language learning environments. This study deals with the issue of the reactions of learners to teacher code-switching, particularly with regard to that code-switching which is motivated by the need to comprehend less frequent lexical items and the reasons which the language teacher have to follow this mode of discourse.

The research questions addressed here are:

1. What are the causes that lead the teachers to use code switching?
2. What do the students think of the teachers' code switching?

### **Literature Review**

Bilingualism is a worldwide phenomenon. Spolsky (1998, p.45) defines a bilingual as 'a person who has some functional ability in the second language'. Before considering the functions of code switching from the teachers' and the students' perspective, it would be appropriate to deal with the use of code switching in its naturally occurring context; in other terms its functions in the discourse of bilingual individuals. According to Trudgill, "speakers switch to manipulate or influence or define the situation as they wish, and to convey nuances of meaning and personal intention" (2000:105). Drawing upon this quotation, it may be suggested that code switching can be used for self expression and is a way of modifying language for the sake of personal intentions. According to Wardhaugh (2005, p.98) some functions of code switching are of convenience, clearer expression, intimacy, solidarity with listeners and choice of topic, which vary according to different situations. Romaine (1994:59) calls code-switching "a communicative option available to a bilingual member of a speech community on much the same basis as switching between styles or dialects is an option for the monolingual speaker"

Different definitions for code switching have been suggested by researchers, for example Gemperz's (1982, p. 59), defined code switching as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems



of subsystems." Myers-Scotton's (2006, p. 239) general definition of code switching is "the use of two languages varieties in the same conversation". A related concept to code switching is code mixing. Researches often differentiate between the two terms. One of the differences between the two terms is the way each of them is used as proposed by Muysken (2000) in that code switching is used for cases in which the two codes maintain their monolingual features, while code-mixing is used for cases where there is some convergence between the two languages. On the other hand, Myers-Scotton (1993) differentiates between the two terms, stating that code switching occurs when bilinguals alternate between two languages during one interaction with another bilingual person while code mixing is the use of words, affixes, phrases and clauses from more than one language within the same sentences. The distinction between code switching and code mixing is one of the most puzzling terminological problems in the study of code-alternation. Some scholars find it necessary to draw a distinction between them because of their syntactic difference. Others, however, prefer to use 'code-switching', 'mixing' or 'code-alternation' as a cover term for both types of code-alternation discussed above (e.g., Gumperz 1982; Grosjean 1982; Lederberg and Morales 1985; Clyne 1991; Bhatia 1992; Li 2000). Clyne (1991) argues that code switching and code mixing refer to the same phenomenon in which 'the speaker stops using language A and employs language B' (p.161). A slightly different line of argument is developed by Romaine (1989) who regards code switching phenomenon as a continuum on which exists both inter-sentential and intra-sentential code-alternation.

Myers-Scotton 1993 has provided a model to account for the linguistic consequences of code-switching, claiming that one language is dominant and the other is subordinate, and that the word structure of the dominant language determines the outcome in the subordinate language.

All of the above literature draws on material from natural discourse, but quite a few studies have also been done on code-switching phenomena in the more formalized



context of classroom interaction. Using ethnographic observations, Merritt et al. (1992) explore the determinants of teacher code switching between English, Swahili and mother-tongue in three Kenyan primary schools. Reasons for code-switching put forward include e.g. the socializing role of the teacher, the importance of variation and repetition, and the teacher's linguistic competence and insecurity. Bergman (1993:90-100, 102) discusses issues of conscious, planned code-switching among teachers in Swedish schools with bilingual education in Swedish and Finnish.

Other accounts include Martin-Jones (1988), who reviews research in bilingual education programs in the context of classroom code-switching. ; she refers to Guthrie's comparative study of two teachers, one bilingual and one monolingual, working with Chinese learners of English in the U.S. The bilingual teacher made use of five communicative functions for switching into Chinese: translation, 'we code', procedures and directions, clarification and check for understanding.

Cook (2001) claims that the systematical use of code switching can be a way into the meaning of the second language, a short cut in the task of explaining by the teacher, a way of explaining grammar a way of demonstrating that the classroom is a real L2 situation. He also states that a teacher of EFL should always remember that the classroom is a natural code-switching situation and there is nothing wrong or peculiar about it.

Another pervasive observation is that code-switching is triggered because speakers are much more familiar with certain concepts or terms in another language, presumably because these code-switched words or phrases are more frequently used in a speech community and hence more accessible. In the case of lexical gap, these code-switched expressions simply do not have any appropriate equivalents in the usual language of the speakers (Baker 2001; Gibbons 1987; Grosjean 1982; Li 2000).



Baker (2006) has discussed the topic of code switching from a sociolinguistics perspective, in which he listed twelve main purposes of code switching, which are relevant to bilinguals' talks in general. Some of these functions can be observed in classroom environment and in relevance to teachers and students interactions. According to Baker, code switching can be used to emphasize a particular point, to substitute a word in place of unknown word in the target language, to express a concept that has no equivalent in the culture of the other language, to reinforce a request, to clarify a point, to express identity and communicate friendship, to ease tension and inject humor into a conversation, and in some bilingual situations, code switching occurs when certain topics are introduced.

Man and Lu (2006) (cited in Baker, 2006) found that in Hong Kong schools both teachers' and students' major reason for code switching was that there was no direct translation of words between English and Cantonese, additionally, the same study of Man and Lu found that teachers in Hong Kong schools use code switching also to ease tension and inject humor in to conversations.

In eliciting teachers reflections to their classroom teachings, Probyn (2010) noticed that most notable strategy that teachers used was code switching to achieve a number of communicative and metalinguistic ends .Researchers see using code switching in the classroom as a "legitimate strategy" (Cook, 2001, p.105) and no matter how it might be disruptive during a conversation to the listener, it still provide an opportunity for language development (Skiba, 1997).

From the analytical point of view, it is necessary to specify that in this case the matrix language, which means the predominant communicative code, is English and, from time to time, the teacher switches to Urdu.



Many teachers, who are in favor of the applications of communicative techniques in the language teaching environment, oppose any form of native language use during classroom instruction. The most vocal opponent of mother tongue use in the classroom has been Stephen Krashen (1981) and his 'comprehensible input' hypothesis. Since Krashen's theory is based on the importance of target language input for second language acquisition, any reduction of the target language would then be seen as a wasted opportunity for valuable input. Some researchers have found that people who use code-switching express shame and even regret at doing so. For example, Davies and Bentahila (2006: 1-2) write: 'Code switching between two languages is usually thought of as a characteristic of casual conversation between peers, used by bilinguals when they are speaking spontaneously, with little concern for how they sound... Instances of bilinguals who express shame or regret at using code switching are, for instance, reported on by several researchers'.

Contrary to this, supporters of the use of native language in the form of code switching, suggest that it may be an effective strategy in various aspects. If the teacher uses code switching in order to transfer the necessary knowledge for the students for clarity. Following the instruction in target language, the teacher code switches to native language in order to clarify meaning, and in this way stresses importance on the foreign language content for efficient comprehension. However, the tendency to repeat the instruction in native language may lead to some undesired student behaviors. A learner who is sure that the instruction in foreign language will be followed by a native language translation may lose interest in listening to the former instruction which will have negative academic consequences; as the student is exposed to foreign language discourse limitedly.

Cook (2002:333) handles the subject matter considering multilingual classrooms in saying that the application of code switching in classes which do not share the same native language may create problems, as some of the students will somehow be neglected. So, at this point it may be suggested that the students should share the same



native language, if code switching will be applied in instruction. Another point to consider in this respect is that the competence of the teacher in mother tongue of students also plays a vital role, if positive contributions of code switching are expected. A further discussion is put forward by Eldridge, as he suggests “the learners have no guarantee that their audience will share knowledge of their mother tongue” (1996:309). This perspective concerns the interaction of students with native speakers of the target language, as mutual intelligibility may not be possible if the learner switches his language during communication.

In supporting the existence of code switching in language classrooms, Skiba (1997) suggests that in the circumstances where code switching is used due to an inability of expression, it serves for continuity in speech instead of presenting interference in language. In this respect, code switching stands to be a supporting element in communication of information and in social interaction; therefore serves for communicative purposes in the way that it is used as a tool for transference of meaning. All these in general lead to the idea that the use of code switching somehow builds a bridge from known to unknown and may be considered as an important element in language teaching when used efficiently.

Several explanations for code-switching in the second language classroom may be relevant to the present study, including, for instance, the following:

**(a)** Linguistic insecurity, e.g. the difficulty teachers experience in relating new concepts, discussed by Merritt et al. (1992:112-13).

**(b)** Topic switch, i.e. when the teacher switches code according to which topic is under discussion; it might be suggested, for instance, that certain aspects of foreign language teaching such as grammar instruction, is preferably expressed in the mother tongue of the students.

**(c)** Affective functions, e.g. spontaneous expression of emotions and emotional understanding in discourse with students.



(d) Socializing functions, i.e. when teachers turn to the students' first language to signal friendship and solidarity (this is briefly touched upon in Merritt et al. 1992:108-9).

(e) Repetitive functions, i.e. when teachers convey the same message in both languages for clarity.

Drawing upon the views of theorists, Scotten, Gumperz, Wardhaugh, Skiba and Cook, the possible functions and uses of teacher's code switching can be deduced.

Firstly, code switching performs linguistic functions when teachers use code-switching in order to transfer the necessary knowledge, which is considered difficult or beyond students' target language level. In other words, code-switching serves to clarify linguistically based confusion. This is the same as discussed under the heading of code switching functions in bilingual community context. Secondly, teachers alter their language according to the topic that is under discussion, a behavior that is mostly observed in teaching literature and linguistics as teachers shift the target language to their students' mother tongue in dealing with particular points. Thirdly, code-switching provides a strategy for explaining the matters taught. The strategy is repetition and exemplification. In this respect, it is also suggested that a bridge from known (L1) to the unknown (L2) is constructed as a teacher can exploit students' previous L1 experiences to increase their understanding of the target literature. Fourthly, teachers' code-switching also carries affective functions that serve for expression of emotions. It is used by the teacher to build solidarity and intimate relations with the students. That is, code switching makes a contribution to creating a supportive teaching environment in the classroom e.g for getting feedback from the students. Code-switching can be used by teachers by integrating it into the teaching points. This can serve as a motivational tool by involving them in discussions so that they can relate the knowledge base in the backdrop of their own culture. Teachers can also begin a lesson in one language, then switch to another language, forcing the learners to listen carefully and comprehend the subject matter.



### **Data collection and analysis**

The present research falls under qualitative paradigm since it is an enquiry which needs qualitative data. It can be called as non experimental research because it only attempts to describe phenomena that happen in human life. Based on the explanation above, the methods used in this research are descriptive and field method. The former is used to achieve the purpose, that is, to obtain knowledge about the using of Urdu words and phrases in language spoken by teachers as code-mixing.

The data was collected keeping in mind the research questions. Twelve teachers, who are teaching literature and linguistics at post graduate level at Govt. Postgraduate College Muzaffargarh, were selected for the interview. Teachers were interviewed individually and later discussion was done in groups. Notes were taken at both the occasions and the data was formalized and analyzed. All the teachers had a teaching experience ranging between five to twenty seven years, they are proficient in three languages i.e a regional language (Punjabi and Saraiki), Urdu and English as a third language. Medium of instruction is English. They are teaching various subjects to the students of MA English and also teaching at inter and degree level. The questions asked in interviews and discussions were whether they use code switching in their classes while teaching English literature and linguistics and when and why do they do that. To know what the learners think of their teacher's use of code switching an extensive discussion was made with the students of the same college who were studying there at graduation and post graduate levels. The questions asked were about the image of the teachers practicing code mixing. The interviews and discussion session were arranged during the first week of January 2011.

Interviews and discussions reveal that the teachers do use code switching as a strategy while teaching content subjects. All the teachers agreed that at some point of teaching they switch their code consciously or unconsciously. The discussions proved to be very interesting and highlighted some of the reasons and functions of code switching.



All of the teachers admitted of using fillers like ‘beta’ (son) or ‘bache’ (son) especially while talking to their students and it acts as a tool for ensuring solidarity. The feeling of closer proximity between the teacher and learners develops if the use of CS is done in order to reduce the element of alienation from the class.

At times teachers at the Postgraduate level feel it is appropriate to switch to L1 in order to bring richness to their discourse. Switching to L1 helps break boredom and monotony. The teachers belied that they switched to L1 when discussion was getting dry and the class was getting bored and the boredom was avoided and the interest of the class in the discussion remained intact.

Some words or concepts of native language do not find an equivalent in L2 and it becomes very difficult for the teacher to express those concepts or ideas in L2. Just like Urdu does not have words for television, computer, engine, machine, tractor, thrasher, necktie, drawing room etc.

A teacher remarked that Code switching has become a sort of habit and the meanings were conveyed through shifting repeatedly and unconsciously. Nine of the twelve respondents identified *habit* as the main reason for the switch. In other words, they felt that code switching was a normal practice in their speech as they were accustomed to this kind of language use.

Yet another factor leading to the use of code mixing was the image and repute of being a “good” teacher and served as the motivating factor for the practice of code mixing. The popularity, image and repute rested more with the teacher who were able make their learner comprehend more and the students as well as the teachers , both agreed that the use of code switching was a reliable source of getting that objective.



An interesting evidence of the code switching by a teacher known in the campus for his strict attitude and avoidance of code mixing in his teaching mentioned by the students is that whenever any student coming late seeks permission for entering the class during his lecture is of saying:

“Tashreef lay aaien” (yes you can come in).

Here, the purpose of code mixing is to snub the practice of coming late. In the same manner the switches to Arabic expression like “Subhan Allah” was also followed by some teachers when criticizing the wrong answer by the students in some sort of inquiry. The participant teachers favored the use of code switching for the teaching of grammar rules. They expressed their strategy of using the example from the national language Urdu, to get their point explained. This use of code switching in the teaching of grammar was a practice favored and followed by all the teachers.

The teachers involved in teaching poetry to the students admitted of quoting the verses from native languages of Pakistan to develop similarity between the ideas of the poets and their expression.

From the discussion and interviews of the teachers and the students it is easy to get the opinion that the teacher switches code for one reason only, to make the students understand the utterances. This of course is one of the main functions of code-switching since the number one purpose of classroom instruction is to teach the students the foreign language in question, and since the students’ proficiency in English language is incomplete, the teacher feels it necessary to use the first language in order to make the students understand. Following the traditional teaching methods still widely spread in Pakistan, teachers believe that the first language is a necessary means of explaining rules and structures of the foreign language. The extensive use of repetitive code-switching can be attributed to the teacher's wish to be as clear as possible in the act of teaching. All the twelve participants have shown positive attitude towards their practice of code switching



and this goes contrary to the findings of Davies and Bentahila (2006) who believe that the user of code mixing discourse feel shame and regret on this practice.

In addition to all the reasons mentioned above, a few other motivations for code switching during the time of the interview; during informal discussions with them or while observing in general the linguistic behavior of the respondents. An important one in this context was the competition among the teachers for a better image of their own among their learners. They, in order to be more comprehensible to their learners used L1 more.

The students do have a positive attitude towards teacher's code mixing. Perhaps this may be due to the prevalent grammar translation method which is probably the most practiced if not the most favored one method followed in the classes.

Drawing upon the above discussion we can see that code switching can be utilized as a useful strategy in a literature and linguistic class classroom by the teachers and it does perform various positive functions especially when the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students at higher levels. Code switching serves the purpose of a very effective teaching tool in bilingual classrooms. The communication in the class can be made easy with the employment of this teaching technique and it is more effective especially at graduate or post-graduate level when the teaching of language is not an issue and the students are already supposed to have a good command of the target language It is important to note that the research on code switching in classroom discourse is still in its early stages especially in Pakistan. My purpose was only to give insights into the phenomenon of code switching from teachers perspective for which I sought help from various famous theorists in the field of code switching. The study supports the claim that first language (L1) is difficult for teachers to avoid, and perhaps more difficult for learners to ignore. The data in this study support Gumperz's framework as the subjects in this study performed code switching to express meanings and enhance communication in



the formal interview setting. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a communicate value to their code switches. It was noticed that code switching was performed mainly to get meaning across effectively rather than any other function such as showing identification or affiliation to a culture.

Analysis has shown that teachers utilize different codes while teaching and it becomes a useful teaching strategy for various purposes. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this was a small case study and there was, inevitably, the possibility of bias in the process of selection. As a consequence, it is not possible to generalize the findings beyond the sample of teacher and the students in the study. Although very preliminary, the present study has shown that teacher code-switching in the foreign language classroom is a relatively unexplored yet highly interesting field of research.

### **Conclusion**

With respect to all points mentioned above, it may be suggested that code switching in language classroom is not always a blockage or deficiency in learning a language, but may be considered as a useful strategy in classroom interaction, if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students in an efficient way. Yet, it should be kept in mind that in long term, when the students experience interaction with the native speakers of the target language; code switching may be a barrier which prevents mutual intelligibility. Accordingly, the teacher has a vital role for preventing its long-term damages on foreign language learning process.

This study provides evidence that teacher code-switching in the classroom is at least not detrimental to the learning process. The unjustified frowning upon teacher code-switching is not reasonable at all. Second, it might be possible, when empirical evidence accrues, to build a more comprehensive and coherent set of guidelines for informing teaching practice. Teacher code-switching may need to be more attuned to the needs of the particular learners in a classroom at any one time, to allow the development of language learning to occur simultaneously for learners of different abilities. Thus, the



current study offers opportunities to re-examine the debate on teacher code-switching, and hopefully, to provide empirical evidence to advise on its optimal use.

In conclusion, while the aim of this little research was to identify the most common uses of code-alternation limiting the field to the central figure of the teacher, there would be many more paths to investigate in the area of code-switching in foreign languages teaching contexts.

For further research, then, it would be of great interest analyzing how the teacher's use and employ of his/her native language in relation to the linguistic level of the students. Is there any connection between the level of foreign language possessed by the students and the amount of code-switching exploited by the teacher? Or is the way a teacher uses code-alternation more or less fixed and personal, independently from the knowledge of his/her addressees? Does a teacher modify his/her usage of code-alternation in a conscious and intentional way or not?

It is undoubted that all these questions, and the possible researches which could spring out from them, would be relevant and useful in order to better understand the way the teacher/student interaction develops and to improve the teaching approach of the educators



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